Predicting crime story salience: A replication

Steven Chermak [a,*], Nicole M. Chapman [b]

[a] *School of Criminal Justice, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824, United States*
[b] *Wisconsin Department of Corrections, 3099 East Washington Avenue, P. O. Box 7925, Madison, WI 53707-7925, United States*

Abstract

This study examined the presentation of crime stories in the media, and filled three gaps within the large body of research in this area: First, it examined the presentation of crime news in different sized cities with significantly different crime rates. Second, it examined not only the content of crime stories, but importantly addressed what factors explain the prominence of crime stories. Third, it demonstrated the importance of using multivariate statistical techniques in conjunction with content analysis. Consistent with previous research in this area, the study found that journalistic decision-making on crime news was influenced primarily by the seriousness of the offense. In addition, the occupation of the defendant was also important. This study also showed, however, that there was considerable variation depending on the size of city. Specifically, the seriousness of a crime event had a limited impact in cities with lower crime rates. Implications for media studies are discussed.
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Introduction

Crimes that become news survive a filtering process. There is an indeterminate amount of crime in society. An unknown percentage of what has been popularly defined as crime is brought to the attention of the police. Then, crimes are gathered or passed from the police organization to the media organization. The crime reporter is then responsible for selecting the stories that seem (according to media organizational standards) most "newsworthy." The resulting crime articles produced by reporters, if not eliminated by an editor, are what reach the public consciousness. Researchers in this area have come to refer to the actors in this process as gatekeepers and the process itself as gatekeeping. Gatekeepers (public information officers, crime reporters, and newspaper editors) all play a role in determining which crimes become news. Otherwise stated, these actors make decisions regarding the

"newsworthiness" of crime events. These gatekeepers learn what is newsworthy about crime through educational and professional training, by interacting formally and informally with other news and source personnel, and by observing story placement and space allocation for various stories. In short, the presentation of crime in the media can therefore be understood by taking the perspective of the news agency as a profit-seeking bureaucracy.

Crime is important news—research consistently concludes that it is one of the most frequently presented topics (Graber, 1980). A main reason why the media portray criminal events as they do is simply because, as an organization, they must attract and maintain a pool of readers (see Croteau & Hoynes, 2001). Furthermore, stories about crime tend to be rather uncomplicated and can therefore be easily lengthened or shortened to fill needed space. Also, because crime reporters tend to get the majority of their information from police departments, it can be gathered efficiently at little cost to the media organization (Chermak, 1995; Surette, 1998). Aside from information

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 517 355 2192.
E-mail address: chermak@msu.edu (S. Chermak).

gleaned from the police wire, crime reporters often contact the police department's public information officer (PIO) for information pertaining to crime. PIOs function to regulate the flow of information regarding crime to the news media, while at the same time "promoting a positive image of their organization" (Surette, 1998, p. 63; see also Chermak & Weiss, 2005).

In 1998, Chermak published an article regarding the prediction of crime story salience using crime, victim, and defendant characteristics. Although a healthy body of literature regarding general variables related to newsworthiness exists (see Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001; Lotz, 1991), few studies had looked at salience to specifically document the specific characteristics that are newsworthy about crime. This study replicated Chermak's (1998) study. Replication is important in that it helps to determine if findings are generalizable across time and space. When possible, similar coding schemes were adapted for purposes of comparison between the two studies.[1] The current study therefore made three important contributions to the extant literature. First, cities of various sizes and with different crime rates were examined, thereby allowing for variations among cities to emerge. Second, this study added to the growing body of literature regarding crime story prominence (what variables influence the amount of space given to crime incidents), whereas previous studies primarily focused on selection for coverage. Third, Chermak (1998) demonstrated the possibility of using multivariate statistical techniques in conjunction with content analysis. Specifically, his review of the literature from 1975 to 1998 revealed that only three studies used such methods (see Chermak, 1998, p. 70). Many more recent studies had used multivariate techniques, but they focused on the presentation of homicide comparing a population of incidents occurring in a specific time frame to media accounts.

Literature review

Stories about crime and the criminal justice system demand a substantial allotment of both time (visual media) and space (print media) in contemporary American news. Furthermore, much of what the general public believes to be true about the prevalence of crime and the operation of the criminal justice system is potentially gleaned from information presented through the mass media. Violent crime is overrepresented in the news, characteristics of violent victims and offenders in the news are not representative of real life demographic distributions, and so-called "media waves" do not necessarily coincide with increases in crime. Consequently, there exist significant implications regarding the public perception of the crime problem, fear of victimization, and potential for violence and aggression among the viewing audience (Chermak, 1995; Estrada, 2001; Graber, 1980; Kennedy & Sacco, 1998; Sheley & Ashkins, 1981; Smith, 1984).

If the media functioned only as an organization which holds a mirror up to the world for the public to view and evaluate, the need for empirical research pertaining to the content of crime news would be unwarranted. Studies have repeatedly demonstrated that crime as presented in the media is a distortion of reality. It is neither practical nor desirable for the media to report on every single criminal incident. Instead, the media reports on a selected portion of criminal incidents—and this selection process is neither random nor is it necessarily an accurate representation of crime in contemporary America. In fact, it appears that the media emphasize the unusual and ignore the routine. In considering crime coverage, one would expect that decision-making to be influenced by the "law of opposites": incidents with infrequently occurring characteristics would be more likely to be covered and covered more prominently (Pollak & Kubrin, 2007; but see Lundman, 2003 for a different view). The current section therefore describes the key factors thought to consistently influence the images of crime as presented in American newspapers.

Offense seriousness matters

Research has documented that not all types of crimes receive coverage that is proportionate to their occurrence in society (Ammons, Dimmick, & Pilotta, 1982; Antunes & Hurley, 1977; Barlow, Barlow, & Chiricos, 1995; Chermak, 1994, 1995; Graber, 1979, 1980; Jerin & Fields, 1995; Jones, 1976; Sheley & Ashkins, 1984; Skogan & Maxfield, 1981; Smith, 1984). Overwhelmingly, research indicates that there is little to no relationship between crime as presented in the media, and crime as it exists in society (crimes known to the police). Specifically, violent crime (e.g., homicide) is overrepresented by the media and property crime (e.g., larceny) and crimes where there is no clear victim (e.g., white-collar crime) are typically underrepresented (Ammons et al., 1982; Antunes & Hurley, 1977; Barlow et al., 1995; Chermak, 1994, 1995; Cohen, 1975; Ditton & Duffy, 1983; Graber, 1979, 1980; Humphries, 1981; Jerin & Fields, 1995; Jones, 1976; Lotz, 1991; Mawby & Brown, 1984; Schlesinger, Tumber, & Murdock, 1991; Sheley & Ashkins, 1981; Skogan & Maxfield, 1981; Smith, 1984; Windhauser, Seiter, & Winfree, 1990). The degree of crime news distortion appears to

be statistically significant when taking the ratio of violent crimes to all other index crimes (as reported in the Uniform Crime Report) into consideration (Ammons et al., 1982; Antunes & Hurley, 1977; Barlow et al., 1995; Jerin & Fields, 1995; Sheley & Ashkins, 1984; Windhauser et al., 1990). For example, in a study that collected crime stories in both 1980 and 1985 from twenty-four daily newspapers in twenty-two Louisiana cities, the researchers concluded that "...crime news simply does not seem to mirror reported crimes. Violent crimes are accorded a statistically unwarranted status in the media, unwarranted when the ratio of violent crimes to all other index crime or total reported crime is considered" (Windhauser et al., 1990, p. 77).

There is a growing body of research that uses a somewhat different approach to understanding the presentation of crime in the news. This approach first collects a known reality of a type of crime, such as all homicides that occur in a jurisdiction or known terrorism incidents (see Chermak & Gruenewald, 2006; Johnstone, Hawkins, & Michener, 1994; Paulsen, 2003; Peelo, Francis, Soothill, Pearson, & Ackerley, 2004; Sorenson, Peterson Manz, & Berk, 1998; Weiss & Chermak, 1998). The second stage of this type of research is searching media sources for the coverage and number of articles about each incident. Researchers use multivariate statistical techniques to identify the factors that predict whether an incident is covered or how much space it receives. Interestingly, these results support the general conclusion that seriousness of the incident is an important newsworthy characteristic. Homicides that are particularly serious, such as those involving multiple victims, and terrorism incidents with casualties, are much more likely to receive news attention and get more space (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2006; Johnstone et al., 1994; Weiss & Chermak, 1998).

Characteristics of victims and offenders in the news

Crime news most often focuses on specific criminal incidents or on individual victims or offenders as opposed to addressing the underlying structural or other causes of crime (Graber, 1979, 1980; Kasinsky, 1994; Kennedy & Sacco, 1998; Surette, 1989). Not all violent crimes receive media attention while many crimes of a nonviolent nature *are* reported. Other variables, such as the characteristics of the victim and defendant, must therefore play an important role in determining crime story selection and prominence in the mass media (Chermak, 1994). The review below focuses on the variables that are included in the analyses to follow.

Age

Boulahanis and Heltsley (2004) examined the factors that increased the likelihood that a Chicago-area homicide was presented in the *Chicago Tribune* and *Sun-Times*. They found that the most significant predictor of juvenile crime coverage was the age of the offender and victim-cases with young offenders and victims were more likely to be covered. Similar findings were reported in other studies (Barlow et al., 1995; Chermak, 1995; Graber, 1980; Johnstone et al., 1994; Mawby & Brown, 1984; Wilbanks, 1984; Yanich, 2005). What's more, young victims are overrepresented when compared to official data sources, according to Chermak's (1995) content analysis of six print and three electronic news sources. Some research also concluded that elderly victims and offenders are particularly newsworthy (Chermak, 1995; M. Fishman, 1978).

Gender

With little exception (see for example, Wilbanks, 1984), media accounts of crime incidents also distort information about the gender of the victim and offender. For example, although males are often cited as victims of crime, women are overrepresented as victims of crime when compared to official data sources (Chermak, 1995) and are blamed for their victimization (Meyers, 1994, 1997). Other studies verified these findings-both in the United States (Boulahanis & Heltsley, 2004; Graber, 1980; Humphries, 1981; Johnstone et al., 1994) and in England (Mawby & Brown, 1984). With regard to offenders, Barlow et al. (1995) reported an overrepresentation of males in their five-year content analysis of *Time* magazine news articles. An earlier study conducted by Humphries (1981) of *New York Post* articles confirmed these findings, noting that more then two-thirds of the offenders in the 1951 and 1968 samples were male.

Occupation

Unlike gender and age of the victim and offender, occupation status is rarely mentioned in crime incident stories and rarely studied (Humphries, 1981). When cited, however, victims and offenders tend to be politicians or criminal justice professionals rather than students, laborers, or individuals in service jobs (Chermak, 1995; Graber, 1980; Surette, 1989). Crimes involving victims or offenders with higher status, when measured by occupation, are likely to increase the likelihood that an incident is covered.

Number of victims and offenders

Several studies had examined the influence of the number of victims and offenders on both the selection and

prominence of crime news (Johnstone et al., 1994; Lundman, 2003; Pizarro, Chermak, & Gruenewald, 2007; Weiss & Chermak, 1998; Wilbanks, 1984). In all cases, a positive relationship has been documented, that is, as the number of victims or offenders increased, so did the likelihood of selection and the degree of prominence. For example, a study of 569 homicide articles published in the *Miami Herald* from 1980 to 1982 concluded that the number of victims is an important predictor of the type and extent of coverage (Wilbanks, 1984).

Other potential indicators of seriousness

According to Surette (1994, p. 135): "…media criminals have become more animalistic, irrational and predatory … and their crimes more violent, senseless and sensational, while their victims have become more random, helpless, and innocent." Such depictions of crime in the media, albeit inaccurate, have the potential to stimulate fear of victimization among members of the public and function to increase the focus on individualistic and punitive as opposed to structural and rehabilitative methods of dealing with the social problem of crime in American society. Two variables of interest are the use of a gun in the crime and the prior record of the defendant. Gun violence is a priority policy topic, especially after a celebrated case, and thus the type of weapon used can increase the importance of a story (see Pizarro et al., 2007). Although defendants, especially the type of defendants that get in the news (i.e., serious, violent felons), generally have extensive criminal careers, this variable is rarely reported in the news (Sandys & Chermak, 1996).

Salience varies by place

Even when cities of different sizes or with different levels of crime are compared, little relationship emerges concerning the amount of crime news (Chermak, 1994, 1995; Cohen, 1975; Graber, 1979, 1980). If anything, there seems to be an inverse relationship at work. For example, Cohen (1975) conducted a comparative analysis of press coverage of crime in Detroit and Atlanta newspapers over a two-week period. The author found that, although there were four times as many crimes known to the police, Detroit newspapers devoted approximately twice as much coverage to crime-related subjects as compared to the Atlanta newspapers. Therefore, the Atlanta press devoted more coverage to crime in proportion to the number of local criminal offenses. Graber (1980) found the ratio of media reports to the number of crimes highest in a town with a comparatively low violent crime rate and lowest in a town with a

comparatively high violent crime rate. Chermak's (1995) content analysis of six print and three electronic news sources confirmed earlier findings. Cities included in the analysis were selected from a list of cities which had at least one newspaper with circulation size 50,000 or greater during the first six months of 1990. Cities were matched by population size and number of index offenses in 1990 and were then stratified as medium (Albany and Buffalo), large (Cleveland and San Francisco), and extra-large (Dallas and Detroit). Although cities of all sizes emphasized crimes of a more violent nature, media in medium-sized cities were significantly less likely to report a homicide than their large or extra-large counterparts. It is important to note that medium-sized cities were more likely to report a murder with only one or two victims as compared to large and extra-large cities. Smaller cities also have access to a smaller number of homicides, and the author concluded that reporters might find it necessary to cover other local crimes of a less serious nature. While fewer homicides may occur in smaller cities, the percentage of total homicides covered by the media appeared to be greater when compared to cities of a larger size.

Research strategy

Three research questions were the focus of this study. First, does seriousness of the offense matter in explaining crime story salience? Research consistently indicates that violence is overrepresented in the media and other types of crime are underrepresented. A study conducted in the United States, for example, found that 80 percent of crime stories presented in selected modern newsmagazine programs focused on random acts of violence in which the victim did not know the offender (Tunnell, 1998). To summarize, "… research indicates that media coverage of crime consistently overrepresents, indeed, exaggerates particularly violent, random crimes; neglects to report that 55 percent of all murders occur between acquaintances" and "fails to report that about 93 percent of all crimes are property crime…" (Tunnell, 1998, p. 111).

Second, do offender characteristics matter in explaining crime story salience? This is an interesting question because most research either ignores these characteristics or assumes that victims' characteristics are much more important. For example, research examining the presentation of homicide in the news concluded that several victim characteristics, especially the race and age of the victim, increased the likelihood that a crime is covered and received significant amounts of space. Other research indicated that some offender characteristics might also influence the presentation of crime news. For example,

Pizarro et al. (2007) found that the defendant's relationship with the victim either increased or decreased the likelihood of coverage depending on the relationship, and having a prior record increased the likelihood of coverage.

Third, do the factors that predict salience vary across size of the city that the newspaper serves? Previous studies have not examined cities with different populations and crime rates. Chermak, however, collected data from six newspapers in six different cities (the *Detroit News*, the *Dallas Morning News*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, the *Albany Times Union*, and the *Buffalo News*). Selection was made by generating a list of cities with newspaper circulation size 50,000 or greater. The eligible pool of cities was then stratified into three groups (medium, large, and extra large) based both on the population and number of index crimes. Such stratification is important because the size of a city and the magnitude of the crime problem may be important components of crime news reporting. For example, earlier research (Chermak, 1994) indicated that news reporters in medium-sized cities were significantly less likely to report a homicide than their large or extra-large counterparts. In short, stratification allows these types of significant variations in the data to emerge.

Research methods

Sampling design

Crime incident stories were collected from four major daily newspapers using Lexus-Nexus. Each newspaper (the *Chicago Tribune,* the *San Diego Union-Tribune,* the *Tulsa World,* and the *Ft. Lauderdale Sun Sentinel*) was queried using the search strategy "crime or police" on one of fourteen different days, a randomly generated construction of two weeks.[2] According to Riffe, Aust, and Lacy (1993), a constructed week sample is an appropriate representation of crime over the course of a year. Furthermore, such a randomly generated construction reduces threats to validity. Specifically, the threat of history is minimized in that the likelihood of a celebrated case or fluctuations in the crime rate affecting the results is controlled.[3]

The current study included only those articles that discussed local crime incidents in the beginning stages of the criminal justice system (discovery, arrest, investigation, and arraignment/indictment). Also included were stories about the local police and police department operations as well as local crime trends, and editorials and citizen letters pertaining to local crime issues. There were two reasons why trial and correctional stage stories were excluded from the analysis. First, prior research indicated that the beginning stages of the criminal justice

process are disproportionately emphasized in the news (Chermak, 1995). Second, crimes stories related to the beginning stages of the process are produced using a very different production process. Specifically, the key, almost exclusive, source of information about the beginning stages of the process is the police (see Chermak & Weiss, 2005). In contrast, there tends to be a much wider range of sources cited in court stories, and crime incident correctional stories are only rarely presented. Since the interest here is on the characteristics of incidents that influence the coverage of crime news, using only stories from the beginning stages minimized the impact of news production variables.[4]

Content analysis

After the above-mentioned searches were downloaded from Lexus-Nexus and filtered to fit the sampling frame, they were systematically read and coded by three researchers. A rigorous coding scheme was adapted and operationalization of variables was discussed in length prior to content analysis. Content analysis was appropriate because the development of systematic and objective criteria enables qualitative news articles to be reliably transformed into quantitative data for use in statistical analysis (Krippendorff, 1980; Singleton, Straits, & Straits, 1993).

After completion of the coding phase, a reliability analysis was undertaken to determine the percentage agreement between coders. Inter-coder reliability among the three coders was 87.1 percent. According to Krippendorff (1980, p. 146), "...the ultimate aim of testing reliability is to establish whether the data obtained in the course of research can provide a trustworthy basis for drawing inferences, making recommendations, supporting decisions, or accepting something as fact."

Dependent variables

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the variables used in this study. A similar coding scheme to Chermak's (1998) investigation was used to enable comparisons to be made between the previous and current studies. Although both studies strived to predict crime story salience, it was important to note the use of different dependent variables. Chermak (1998) used both the number of column inches and an attention score as indicators of salience (for a further discussion of these variables, see Chermak, p. 63). The data were collected for that study from microfiche, and thus, column inches and the attention score were appropriate for measuring salience. The availability of media data via electronic data bases has provided

Table 1
Mean and standard deviation of variables

Variables	Chicago Tribune			San Diego Union Tribune			Tulsa World			Ft. Lauderdale Sun Sentinel			All papers		
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N
Dependent															
Number of words	110.75	161.45	520	223.88	203.39	124	501.76	371.23	37	383.41	323.26	145	193.11	248.74	826
Independent															
Crime variables															
Murder	.06	.24	492	.06	.24	86	.14	.35	22	.25	.44	75	.09	.28	675
Other violent	.16	.37		.56	.50		.36	.49		.28	.45		.23	.42	
Economic	.03	.16		.02	.15		.05	.21		.07	.25		.03	.17	
Other felony	.08	.27		.06	.24		.05	.21		.15	.36		.08	.28	
Misdemeanor crimes	.16	.37		.12	.32		.32	.48		.07	.25		.15	.36	
Victimless crimes	.11	.32		.06	.24		.05	.21		.03	.16		.09	.29	
Property [a]															
Number of crimes	1.90	2.57	490	2.58	8.47	85	11.91	26.51	22	2.00	2.62	76	2.33	6.30	673
Weapon used	.18	.38	490	.37	.49	124	.24	.44	37	.24	.43	134	.22	.41	785
Defendant variables															
Female	.18	.38	319	.12	.33	65	.14	.36	21	.04	.20	50	.15	.36	455
Male [a]															
Young	.05	.22	291	.07	.25	75	.05	.22	21	.11	.32	36	.06	.24	423
Old	.22	.41		.61	.49		.67	.48		.36	.49		.32	.47	
Middle-age [a]															
Professional	.05	.23	73	.00	.00	13	.00	.00	2	.26	.45	19	.08	.28	107
Criminal justice	.04	.20		.15	.38		1.00	.00		.32	.48		.12	.33	
Other occupation	.73	.45		.54	.52		.00	.00		.21	.42		.60	.49	
Blue-collar [a]															
Prior record	.78	.43	18	.86	.38	7	1.00	.00	3	.80	.42	10	.82	.39	38
Number of defendants	1.50	1.90	336	1.95	2.55	73	1.57	.75	21	1.42	1.02	52	1.56	1.91	482
Victim variables															
Female	.31	.46	252	.16	.37	61	.24	.44	17	.30	.46	57	.28	.45	387
Business	.42	.50		.38	.49		.29	.47		.19	.40		.38	.49	
Male [a]															
Child	.10	.31	78	.00	.00	47	.17	.39	12	.03	.17	33	.06	.25	170
Youth	.18	.39		.04	.20		.08	.29		.18	.39		.14	.34	
Old	.31	.47		.70	.46		.33	.49		.40	.50		.44	.50	
Middle-age [a]															
Professional	.03	.17	66	.00	.00	7	–	–	0	.14	.36	21	.05	.23	94
Criminal justice	.17	.38		.29	.49		–	–		.24	.44		.19	.40	
Other occupation	.60	.49		.43	.53		–	–		.33	.48		.53	.50	
Blue-collar [a]															
Number of victims	1.27	1.09	305	2.03	6.55	63	1.40	1.55	15	1.59	1.25	66	1.43	2.67	449

[a] Reference category.

opportunities to examine other measures of salience. The number of words was used for two reasons. First, the number of words has become increasingly used as the preferred proxy for salience in studies examining factors related to the presentation of homicide and crime (Paulsen, 2003; Peelo et al., 2004; Sorenson et al., 1998). Second, more variation was expected in the number of words per article than in the number of column inches or in Budd's attention score (Budd, 1964). That is, Budd's attention score ranging in value from 0 to 5 such

that only six unique values were possible. And—although the number of column inches and the number of words per article arguably have an upper limit—there should be more variation in the number of words since one column inch contains many words.[5]

Independent variables

One of the key independent variables was offense type. The crime which was the focus of the story was

coded and then placed in one of seven categories: murder (including manslaughter), other violent crime (i.e., robbery, rape, shooting, and aggravated assault), economic (i.e., fraud, embezzlement, counterfeiting, and forgery), other felony, misdemeanor and victimless (i.e., drugs), and property (i.e., burglary and larceny). Next, six dummy variables were created and the property crime variable was designated as the reference category. It was hypothesized that, on average, the number of words would be greater if the crime which is the focus of the story is violent, and less if a property or victimless crime is emphasized.

There were four defendant variables included as independent variables in the analysis. The first defendant variable was gender and was coded as a binary variable where 0 = males and 1 = females. Based on earlier research, it was expected that more space would be devoted to those articles which discuss a male defendant, as compared to articles where a female defendant is referenced (Barlow et al., 1995; Humphries, 1981).

The second defendant variable was age and was coded as two sets of dummy variables, where the first dummy represented young defendants (up to sixteen years old) and the second dummy represented old defendants (over thirty-five years old). Defendants aged seventeen to thirty-five were considered "middle-age" for purposes of this analysis and served as the reference category. It was hypothesized that the number of words would be greater if the defendant is either young or old, as these incidents would likely be more unusual and therefore considered to be more newsworthy by the media.

Occupation was the third defendant variable and was coded in a manner similar to the defendant's age, as described above. Specifically, three dummy variables were created to represent occupational status: professional (i.e., politicians, medical personnel), criminal justice professional (i.e., police officers, judges, attorneys), and other occupation (i.e., journalists, teachers). Blue-collar workers served as the reference category for the defendant's occupational status. In accordance with earlier findings, it was expected that articles which cite professionals or members of the criminal justice system as defendants would be longer than if the defendant falls into a different occupational category (Chermak, 1995; Graber, 1980; Surette, 1989).

A fourth defendant variable was included as a dummy where 0 indicated the defendant had no prior record and 1 indicated the defendant had a prior record. Crimes committed by those with a prior record may be viewed as a greater threat to public safety. Therefore, the number of words should be greater as a reflection of this concern.

Control variables

Several control variables were included in the analyses. Number of crimes was simply coded as the number of different crimes mentioned in the article. Another control variable represented whether a weapon was mentioned in the article. A value of 0 indicated that no weapon was used, while a value of 1 indicated that some type of weapon was mentioned in conjunction with the crime (i.e., gun, knife, fist, blunt object, or other).

There were three victim variables included as control variables in the analysis. The first victim variable was gender, which was coded in a fashion similar to the gender of the defendant. An additional dummy variable was included to represent business victims and males served as the reference category. Occupational status was coded in the same manner as the defendant occupation variable. Age was coded as child, youth, and old. Middle-age served as the reference category.

Findings

As presented in Table 1, the mean number of words for the 826 crime stories included in the study was 193.11. Of the 826 articles, 520 were collected from the *Chicago Tribune* for the fourteen-day sample with a mean number of 110.75 words per article,[6] 124 articles were collected from the *San Diego Union-Tribune* with a mean number of 223.88 words per article, 37 articles were collected from the *Tulsa World* with a mean number of 501.76 words per article, and 145 articles were collected from the *Ft. Lauderdale Sun Sentinel* with a mean number of 383.41 words per article.[7]

Data on the relative frequency of crimes reported to the police and appearing in the news are presented in Table 2. Previous research had demonstrated crime news distortion by comparing the ratio of violent crimes to all other Part I Index Crimes (as reported in the UCR) to the ratio of violent crimes to all other Part I Index Crimes presented in the media (Ammons et al., 1982; Antunes & Hurley, 1977; Barlow et al., 1995; Jerin & Fields, 1995; Sheley & Ashkins, 1984; Windhauser et al., 1990). It appears that the results conformed to earlier findings. That is, violent crime was overrepresented in the media and nonviolent crime was underrepresented in the media when compared to official crime data. The *Chicago Tribune* was an exception only because of the unusual number of larcenies reported in the news during the sample period.

Table 3 shows the results from the model using robust regression, which included all newspapers (the *Chicago Tribune*, the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, the *Tulsa World*, and the *Ft. Lauderdale Sun Sentinel*) and examined the

Table 2
Percentages of Part I index crimes: UCR versus reported in news

Part I index crimes	Chicago		San Diego		Tulsa		Ft. Lauderdale		All cites	
	UCR [a]	News	UCR [a]	News	UCR [a]	News	UCR [a]	News	UCR [a]	News
Violent crimes	24.40%	31.90%	15.08%	79.59%	14.16%	88.88%	10.73%	74.47%	18.70%	44.52%
Murder	.30	11.11	.10	10.20	.13	33.33	.06	40.43	.19	15.10
Rape	− [b]	2.15	.74	4.08	.96	0.00	.48	4.26	.34	2.60
Robbery	9.86	5.38	4.01	48.98	2.54	44.44	3.95	14.89	6.76	13.02
Aggravated assault	14.24	13.26	10.23	16.33	10.53	11.11	6.24	14.89	11.41	13.80
Property crimes	75.61%	68.10%	84.92%	20.40%	85.84%	11.11%	89.26%	25.53%	81.29%	55.47%
Burglary	15.85	13.98	17.12	12.24	22.51	0.00	18.87	14.89	17.26	13.54
Larceny	46.65	50.18	51.49	2.04	51.48	0.00	57.06	8.51	50.24	37.76
Motor vehicle theft	13.11	3.94	16.31	6.12	11.85	11.11	13.33	2.13	13.79	4.17
N	256,413 [c]	279	119,357 [c]	49	40,088 [c]	9	105,952 [c]	47	521,810 [c]	384 [d]

[a] Information from this table was collected from the FBI's Uniform Crime Report (UCR) for each city included in the current study.
[b] Not available.
[c] Crime rates were calculated using the modified crime index, which does not include the index crime of arson.
[d] Out of the total 826 articles, 384 included a Part I index crime which was the focus of the article.

effects of crime, victim, and defendant characteristics on the number of words. Overall, the model was significant at the .001 level. Only those independent variables which played a significant role in explaining the variation of the number of words are presented.[8] Interpretation of the parameter estimate associated with the number of crimes followed traditional interpretation: as the number of crimes increased, the number of words increased. The remainder of the independent variables were dichotomous variables and required a different interpretation. By way of illustration, if the crime which was the focus of the story was murder (MURDER = 1), more words were written than articles which highlighted a property offense (the reference category), controlling for the effects of the other independent variables.

There did, however, seem to be general support for the notion that seriousness affects salience. For example, the number of crimes was a significant predictor of the number of words when the effects of the type of crime and the occupational status of the defendant were held constant. The murder, other violent crimes, economic, and other felony variables also had positive and significant influences on the number of words, compared to stories which focused on property offenses, holding the effects of defendant occupation variable constant. Finally, victimless crimes and misdemeanors were not significant.

These results confirmed Chermak's (1998) findings that the number of crimes and the type of crime are significant in predicting the presentation of crime news. Specifically, the number of crimes and the murder offense variables had significant and positive effects on salience in both studies. While Chermak (1998) reported that victimless crimes had a significant and positive impact on

attention, the current study did not reveal such a relationship. It is conceivable that no effect on the number of words was uncovered because of the declining social importance afforded to such crimes. While the 1980s and early 1990s ushered in a moral panic (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978) with regard to drug use (a victimless crime), more recent years may represent

Table 3
Regression of number of words on crime and defendant variables

Variables	Number of words	
	Coefficient	Standard error
Number of crimes	50.23****	7.47
Type of crime		
Murder	204.99****	36.60
Other violent	67.31**	28.70
Economic	107.65***	41.02
Other felony	423.89****	54.37
Misdemeanor	33.10	34.33
Victimless	−18.59	34.94
Property [a]		
Defendant occupation		
Professional	102.41**	44.52
Criminal justice	244.47****	36.05
Other	−37.64	27.17
Blue-collar [a]		
(Constant)	27.21	
	F = 25.67****	
	N = 106	

[a] Reference category.
 * $p < .10$.
 ** $p < .05$.
 *** $p < .01$.
 **** $p < .001$.

a decline in public concern with regard to drugs. Finally, the current study identified several other types of crime which significantly determined the number of words. Relationships identified by Chermak (1998) were all in the same direction as in this replication, but was not significant. There may be two reasons for this. First, different dependent variables were utilized in the studies. Second, Chermak (1998) included in his study only those articles which were greater than three column inches in length, whereas the current study did not impose a restriction on article size. In fact, a good number of articles gathered from the *Chicago Tribune* for purposes of this study were relatively short in length and would not have been included in Chermak's (1998) analysis. It is therefore possible that crime stories chosen as filler do not share the same characteristics as longer crime articles.

In addition to the number and type of crime variables, the defendant's occupation was a significant contributor to the model (see Table 3). Compared to blue-collar workers, crime stories about defendants with professional-oriented occupations were longer, controlling for the effects of the other variables. In addition, crime stories which involved a defendant from the criminal justice

system were typically longer compared to stories involving a blue-collar defendant, holding the effects of the other variables constant. Chermak (1998) reported that both defendant gender and age were significant predictors of crime story salience, while the results for the current study did not support these findings.

Following Chermak's (1998) lead, additional regression models were specified for each city and are presented in Table 4. This refinement is important because, according to Chermak, "…reporters have access to very different types of crime when covering crimes in larger cities…" Therefore, victim and defendant characteristics may "…have more of an impact on the salience of crime stories" (1998, p. 66).

As shown in Table 4, the four models were significant in predicting the number of words per crime story. An examination of the individual parameter estimates yielded mixed results. As was the case with the overall model, the number of words in *Tribune* articles appeared to be influenced by the seriousness of the crime. For example, as the number of crimes increased, the number of words per articles increased in *Tribune* articles, holding the other variables constant. Crime stories which discussed murder

Table 4
Regression of number of words on crime variables by city

Variables	Chicago Tribune		San Diego Union Tribune		Tulsa World		Ft. Lauderdale Sun Sentinel	
	Number of words		Number of words		Number of words		Number of words	
	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE
Number of crimes	43.55****	3.59	−.53	17.16	2.41	1.44	31.27	77.21
Type of crime								
Murder	285.90****	21.85	−1.53	30.65	−2.58	192.8	224.52***	89.10
Other violent	13.16	13.52	−39.98**	19.04	118.04	179.20	107.89	87.72
Economic	70.29****	20.21	117.77	43.69***	713***	236.15	158.58	129.92
Other felony	.0008	28.63	281.52****	.74	21	236.15	315.06***	103.85
Misdemeanor	14.68	15.64	−18.38	25.58	105.23	179.08	126.90	128.94
Victimless	−15.80	15.69	9.85	30.65	331.59	236.16	693.50****	184.8
Property [a]								
Defendant occupation								
Professional	−29.86	26.51						
Criminal justice	433.95****	26.03						
Other	−4.06	13.8						
Blue-collar [a]								
(Constant)	6.16		148.80		138.18		98.23	
	F=82.23***		F=22.438***		F=2.79**		F=3.27***	
	N=71		N=85		N=22		N=74	

[a] Reference category.
  * $p<.10$.
 ** $p<.05$.
*** $p<.01$.
**** $p<.001$.

were longer than stories which focused on property crimes, holding the effects of the other variables constant. Finally, crimes committed by criminal justice professionals in Chicago were covered extensively compared to a story about a crime committed by a blue-collar worker. Examination of the models for the remaining cities revealed weak support for the seriousness hypothesis. Aside from Chicago, the murder variable was significant only in the Ft. Lauderdale model; the other felonies variable was significant in the San Diego and Ft. Lauderdale models; and the other violent crime variable was significant in the San Diego model. Chermak (1998, p. 66) hypothesized that "the type of offense should be more important in cities where reporters do not have access to serious, violent crime." Based on this hypothesis and on the relative frequency of violent crimes presented in Table 2, it was expected that the type of offense would influence the number of words the most in *Ft. Lauderdale Sun Sentinel* crime articles and the least in the *Chicago Tribune* crime articles. As Table 4 indicates, little to no support was found for this hypothesis in the current study.

In the original study, Chermak (1998) reported that the number of victims was the best predictor of crime story salience across all of the different-sized cities examined. Although the current study utilized number of crimes instead of number of victims for the city-level analysis, only one of the four cities (Chicago) exhibited this pattern. Differences in results between the two studies could be the result of using different indicators for crime story salience. Moreover, Chermak (1998) included in his study those articles which were greater than three column inches in length, whereas the current study did not impose a restriction on article size. Again, it is possible that crime stories chosen as filler do not share the same characteristics as longer crime articles.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was the replication of Chermak's (1998) research regarding the prediction of crime story salience using crime, victim, and defendant characteristics. The method of data collection and analysis used by Chermak (1998) made three important contributions to the extant literature. First, cities of various sizes and with different crime rates were examined, thereby allowing for variations among cities to emerge. Second, his study added to the growing body of literature regarding crime story prominence, whereas previous studies had primarily focused on selection for coverage. Third, Chermak (1998) demonstrated the possibility of using multivariate statistical techniques in conjunction with content analysis. The current study replicated Chermak's

(1998) effort using different cities in a different year to see if results are generalizable across time and space.

General support for the notion that seriousness of a criminal incident influences story salience was reported in both the original (Chermak, 1998) and current studies. Specifically, Chermak (1998) reported that the number of victims and the number of crimes have a significant and positive impact on crime story salience. The current study confirmed these findings by revealing a significant and positive relationship between the number of crimes and the number of words per article. Findings were somewhat mixed regarding effects of the type of offense on the presentation of crime news. Relationships between type of offense and salience identified by Chermak (1998) were all in the same direction as in this replication, but were not statistically significant. Previous research demonstrated that violent crimes are overrepresented in the media regarding their frequency of selection for coverage. The current study provided evidence that violent crimes as presented in the media are also more salient. No consistent and predictable trends between cities of different sizes with different crime rates was identified in this study nor emerged when compared to the original research effort (Chermak, 1998). Although this study reported several significant findings and revealed similarities with Chermak's (1998) research, several important questions remain.

First, future research regarding crime story salience should work to identify a more comprehensive measure of salience. Chermak (1998) used the number of column inches and Budd's (1964) attention score as indicators for salience while the current study utilized the number of words per article. All of these indicators, while tapping into the concept of salience, are subject to measurement error since salience is a multidimensional construct. For example, the number of column inches and the number of words help identify article length, but are not able to measure the article's placement in the newspaper. And—while Budd's attention score encompasses both length and placement—it is a discrete and bounded measure. Alternatively, researchers may choose to run several different regression models if a multidimensional, continuous, and unbounded measure for salience cannot be identified (this approach was, in fact, utilized by Chermak, 1998).

Second, future research may want to include additional predictors of crime story salience in their models. For example, no research has used the relative frequency of crime stories to predict the degree of prominence. The presentation of crime news from day to day is dynamic and depends to some extent on other newsworthy stories

(i.e., foreign affairs, politics, etc.). The use of such a predictor would allow researchers to separate out the effects of this dynamic selection process.

Third, further investigation should be dedicated to the analysis of cities of different sizes with different crime rates. Previous research has, to date, provided mixed and weak findings in this regard. In addition, it is important to examine all crime stories presented in a particularly sampling frame to determine if the criminal justice stage significantly influences salience.

Fourth, should researchers continue to include characteristics of the victim and defendant in assessing the impact on the presentation of crime news, the problem of missing data needs to be addressed. For example, both Chermak (1998) and the current study were forced to drop the race variable from the analysis as race was rarely mentioned in crime incident stories. This was an important limitation as scholars who have been able to include race in models predicting the salience of homicide (Johnstone et al., 1994; Weiss & Chermak, 1998), and other scholars who have done interesting qualitative research in this area concluded that is it a significant variable (Meyers, 1997, 2004). Likewise, many other victim and defendant characteristic variables were dropped from the current models as a result of missing information. Thus, there are essentially four solutions to the problem of missing data that future research should consider. First, sample sizes could be increased. This technique has been made easier through the availability of many news sources in electronic form. Unfortunately, more time and resources would need to be dedicated in the collection and coding phases if this method was used. Second, additional information could be collected from crime incident stories. Many stories in the current study, for example, included a picture from which race, gender, and age of the victim or defendant might have been inferred if not mentioned explicitly in the article text. It is also possible that newspaper readers attribute certain characteristics to the victim and defendant based on the reported location of the criminal incident. Reported incidents primarily target local crime; most readers are likely familiar with the demographic composition of neighborhoods mentioned in the article. Research could capitalize on this geographic component of stories by matching neighborhood or census tract attributes to those stories which cite the location of the crime. Third, researchers could use missing data to their advantage in examining the presentation of crime in the news. It could be, for example, that the absence of certain victim and defendant characteristics played a central role in determining crime story salience. According to Chermak (1995), victim-offender relationships were rarely mentioned, thereby leaving interpretation to reader

stereotypes and potentially giving the impression that the crime has occurred between two strangers. Thus, one might argue that "stranger-effects" increase the prominence of crime news, consequently giving readers the impression that "…media criminals have become more animalistic, irrational and predatory…and their crimes more violent, senseless and sensational, while their victims have become more random, helpless, and innocent" (Surette, 1994, p. 135). In terms of empirically researching this phenomenon, the existence of missing data can be used to an advantage. An interesting application described by Orme and Reis (1991) involved the coding of missing data. Using this method allowed a higher sample size to be maintained and increased statistical power and estimate efficiency when compared to either the listwise or pairwise treatment of missing data. Finally, researchers could use the approach increasingly used to study homicide, collecting a random sample of crime incidents from a jurisdiction and then searching for media coverage of these incidents.

Future research may consider the extension of multivariate statistical analysis in predicting crime story salience to countries other than the United States. To date, few studies in the United States had compared cities of different populations and with different crime rates, while no studies had made direct comparisons between countries. Furthermore, little is known about the prominence of crime stories outside the United States and multivariate statistical techniques outside the U.S. have been limited to the study of Israeli crime news articles (G. Fishman & Weinmann, 1985).

Notes

1. Furthermore, the current study made three methodological improvements over the original study. First, data collection and coding of crime articles was completed by three researchers in this study, whereas only one researcher was utilized in Chermak's (1998) study. As a result of using multiple coders, the current study was able to substantiate coding practices through an examination of inter-coder reliability. Second, the current study enlisted a different indicator for salience. Chermak (1998) used two indicators of salience as dependent variables in a regression model: size of the article in column inches and the construction of attention scores using a method developed by Budd (1964). Since crime articles in the current study were available via an electronic data base, the number of words per article served as the indicator for salience. Third, robust regression was used instead of ordinary least squares regression. Media data are particularly challenging to work with, and one of the reasons that OLS is unlikely to be appropriate is the influence of outlier cases. Some crime stories receive extraordinary amounts of news coverage. There are several ways to minimize the impact of outlier cases. First, as was done in this study, select a sample randomly. Thus, a celebrated crime incident may be included in the sample by chance, but its influence will be mediated because it is likely that its coverage for one day is included. The second

way is to manage outlier cases using appropriate statistical techniques, like robust regression.

2. The data presented in this study were collected for a project to examine media-police relationships. A national survey was distributed to large enforcement and media agencies in 240 cities. The survey results were used to categorize departments, and two law enforcement agencies with positive and two agencies with negative relationships with the media were chosen. A complete discussion of the newspaper selection process can be found in the final report of this study (see Chermak & Weiss, 1999).

3. There were other approaches that could have been used to identify the articles. The reason why Lexus-Nexus was searched, instead of collecting actual papers, was to make the data collection manageable. The use of two broad terms, such as crime and police, increased the likelihood that most of the crime-related articles of interest would be included.

4. Future research should explore this issue in more detail. One hypothesis would be that the factors explaining crime salience would be similar across stage because of shared understandings of newsworthiness. Conversely, it is equally plausible that the news needs of different stages results in different crimes being emphasized.

5. Also noteworthy is the potential for measurement error in the dependent variable. If such measurement error is random, parameter estimates for the independent variables remain unbiased but parameter estimate efficiency is sacrificed and the value of the coefficient of determination (R^2) attenuated (Berry, 1993). Put simply, because the parameter estimates remain unbiased, the statistical tests of significance can still be trusted. On the other hand, if measurement error is not random, estimates will be biased as will the resulting t-and F-statistics (that is, what appears to be statistically significant may not be and vice versa). The source of nonrandom measurement error can be a function of measuring the variable itself or from the effects of extraneous variables (Berry, 1993). In the current context, the number of words per article is not a subjective measure, unlike Budd's attention score and, to a lesser extent, the number of column inches. Thus, nonrandom measurement error of the dependent variable is minimized through the use of number of words per articles in that there is less error in the measurement of the variable itself. There remains, however, the unavoidable issue of nonrandom measurement error entering the model as a function of some unobserved, extraneous variable.

6. It is indeed unusual that so many crime stories appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* compared to the other newspapers. Of the fourteen-day sample period, eight dates had fifty or more crime articles. The distribution of number of words for each of these problem dates yielded positively skewed distributions where the median number of words per article ranged from forty-seven to sixty words. It therefore appeared that the *Chicago Tribune* relies heavily upon the use of crime news as filler. It is also conceivable that the *Chicago Tribune* produced such a large number of crime stories as a function of the paper's distribution of multiple suburban editions.

7. The numbers in Table 1 may not add to 826 because of missing data for specific variables.

8. The weapon, prior record, the victim variables, and most of the defendant variables had little to no impact on the size of crime articles. There were a large number of missing cases for these variables, so the models were re-specified to include only the independent variables of interest.

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